

**STATEMENT OF STEPHANIE TOOTHMAN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR,
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PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE
SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE ENERGY AND
NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING S. 869, A BILL TO
ESTABLISH THE ALABAMA BLACK BELT NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA,
AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.**

JULY 31, 2013

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 869, a bill to establish the Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area, and for other purposes.

The Department recommends deferring action on S. 869 until the National Park Service (NPS) completes a final review of the feasibility study for the proposed Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area. The NPS has reviewed the current feasibility study, submitted by the Center for the Study of the Black Belt at the University of West Alabama, and determined that there are nationally significant resources and stories associated with the Alabama Black Belt. However, the study needs to be revised before the NPS can determine that it meets the interim criteria for designation as a national heritage area. We recommend that the Center for the Study of the Black Belt continue to work with the NPS National Heritage Area Program to refine the statement of national importance, contributing resources, supporting themes, and boundary for the proposed heritage area, as well as other key sections of the study associated with these assessment topics.

In addition, the Department recommends that Congress enact program legislation that establishes criteria to evaluate potential qualified national heritage areas and a process for the designation, funding, and administration of these areas before designating any additional new national heritage areas.

Geographically, Alabama's Black Belt is part of a larger crescent-shaped area known as the Southern Black Belt, which extends from Virginia to Texas. The term refers to the fertile black soil of the region. This soil drew pioneers to settle the lower-central portion of Alabama in the 1820s and 1830s where they established and operated a network of cotton plantations using the labor of enslaved African Americans. During the Antebellum era, the Alabama Black Belt became one of the wealthiest and most politically powerful regions in the United States.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, this area gained fame as the site where the Tuskegee Airmen trained during World War II, and as a center of the civil rights movement in the

1950s and 1960s. Montgomery County was the site of the 1955-56 bus boycott that challenged segregation of public transportation. Highway 80 in Dallas, Lowndes, and Montgomery counties shaped the route taken by participants of the historic march for equal rights from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization, later the Black Panther Party, was an outgrowth of that march.

S. 869 would establish the Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area within nineteen counties in the State of Alabama. The Center for the Study of Black Belt would be designated as the Heritage Area's local coordinating entity, and the bill defines the duties of the Center for the Study of Black Belt, including the preparation and implementation of a management plan. S. 869 also provides a process for review and approval of the management plan by the Secretary of the Interior.

If the committee decides to move forward with S. 869, we would like to work with the committee to provide the appropriate map reference for the national heritage area and to ensure that the language of the bill is consistent with previously enacted national heritage area designations.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or any members of the subcommittee may have.